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# He Laid Hold On Life

*The Story of*  
**Harry White Myers**

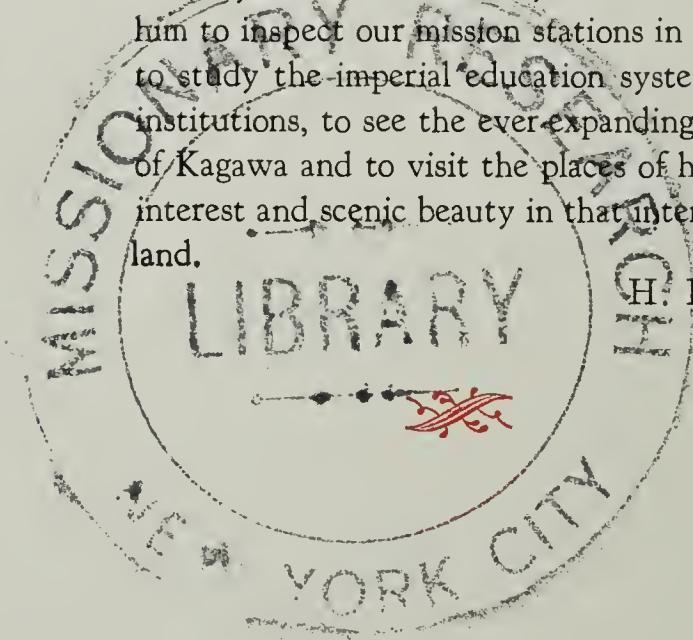
By HENRY H. SWEETS

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The author was a fellow-student with Harry W. Myers in the Louisville Theological Seminary; associated with him in mission work in the city of Louisville; was with him Saturday nights during their student days at the home of his cousins, Miss Lucia Blain, who was on the editorial staff of the *Christian Observer* and Miss Mary, who read aloud choice gems of poetry and stories for discussion; was one of the groomsmen at his wedding; was a guest in the Myers' home in Kobe; and went with him to inspect our mission stations in Japan, to study the imperial education system and institutions, to see the ever-expanding work of Kagawa and to visit the places of historic interest and scenic beauty in that interesting land.



# He Laid Hold On Life

## *The Story of Harry White Myers*

In a home of refinement and Christian culture in Lexington, in the beautiful Valley of Virginia, on May 20, 1874, there was born a baby whom the parents named Harry White Myers. Harry died in Bronxville, New York, August 5, 1945. What a life was lived and what a service rendered during the twenty-six thousand and twenty-seven days of his earthly pilgrimage!

Harry had a good start. An English writer, George Steven, said: "The main difference between the best and the worst personalities is the choice by another hand than their own of the circumstances which shall play upon them in youth, out of which spring the thoughts, feelings, acts of choice and efforts which make the man." Loving and trusting hands guided this boy.

In their home the Bible was accepted as the rule of faith and practice. It was reverently read, carefully studied, and faithfully applied to life. The church was loved and was regarded as an extension of the home—the family of God. The father, Henry H. Myers, was an elder in the Presbyterian church, and the mother, Mary Ella Nelson Myers, was president of the missionary society. The missionaries who came to the

Lexington church were usually entertained in the Myers' home. While reading a book at the age of seven years Harry was impressed with the thought that it was God's plan for his life that he should be a foreign missionary, and he decided he wanted to go to Africa. God wanted him in Japan.

In Lexington, Missouri, into another home of Christian love and faith and practice there came a little girl to whom her parents, Judge and Mrs. Richard Field, prophetically gave the name of Grace. She grew to be a young woman of fine personality, Christian culture, sympathetic understanding, and with a consuming desire to serve God, her own household and her generation.

On November 29, 1897, in the Presbyterian church at Lexington, Missouri, Grace Field and Harry Myers were united in marriage. He had just been ordained as a missionary by the Presbytery of Lexington in Virginia, and they went on their honeymoon to Japan, sent out by the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

Harry had graduated with honors from Washington and Lee University when he was eighteen years of age. He took all the extra courses he could crowd in and then secured the master's degree in one year. He had a wonderful memory and seemed to forget nothing he had ever learned. He could hold families spell-

bound with choice selections of children's songs, games and entertaining stories.

## *Alert in Mind and Heart*

He often expressed the desire and purpose to learn some new thing every day. Those who knew him well know how faithfully he followed this plan. There were few themes on which he could not carry on enlightening conversation. He accepted the Bible challenge: "Prove all things." He used both his brain and his heart. He reasoned within himself, he listened to others, he worked his knowledge out in his own experience, and thus found wisdom. He constantly grew in the attitude and spirit of humility. In recent years he often quoted gleefully the words of Benjamin Franklin: "As I grow older I come more sincerely to doubt the infallibility of my own mind."

His constant search for knowledge and his practical use of it can be illustrated in many ways. After going to the Orient he was on a small steamer that stuck on a sandbar off the coast of Japan and had to wait half a day for the tide to rise. He had with him a book on the cultivation of flowers which he attentively read. Years after he spoke of what a blessing that apparently wasted day had been to him, for he had learned from the book how to revive drooping flowers, and added: "I can apply those same

principles to reviving drooping men." And he did!

Because he kept free from worry and daily sought help from God, Harry Myers was able to stand up physically under the vast amount of work he did all his life. He went to Japan to preach the Gospel. He did not spare himself in this. On his bicycle he rode up and down the valley as an evangelist. He visited homes, taught Bible classes, preached on the streets, sometimes at the horse races, had people in conferences at his room at a hotel or at his home often until after midnight. He helped organize one church after another until there were fifteen in Kobe. He also served as pastor of the English-speaking church in Kobe for many years while teaching in the seminary and looking after struggling mission churches. He and his wife always kept their hearts and home open to all. Missionaries of all denominations from all lands as they passed through Kobe to inland Japan or to Korea enjoyed their hospitality and profited by their counsel and help.

His sister Patty and her husband, Rev. Charles A. Logan, in the early years, lived in their home and were associated with them in their work. Harry and Patty turned over to the Kobe Theological Seminary an inheritance they received from their brother Nelson's estate, which enabled this institution to provide better

for the training of Japanese and Korean preachers. In this seminary Harry taught New Testament Greek, Church History, Music, Astronomy and other subjects.

## **Sympathetic Understanding**

Both he and his wife were interested in people both high and low. Harry was constantly preaching and teaching and ministering to those in need; and Grace, besides making a home for him and for all who were in need of friends, gave much time and energy to kindergarten and other work. They both constantly revealed great and rare gifts of appreciation. They humbly sought to understand people, to recognize their deeper needs, and to minister to them in the realm of the spirit. Their sympathies were broad and their help was extensive.

They won the friendship of Mrs. Sugimoto, who wrote the charming book, "A Daughter of the Samurai." In this she tells of the awful distress of her mother and her grandmother when she told them she had become a Christian—because "the only impression most of the Japanese had was that Christianity was a curious belief, lacking in ceremony, whose converts were required to trample upon sacred things." She was able to convince her mother that her new faith did not require disrespect for her ancestors—but she could not convince her honorable and

aged grandmother. Mrs. Sugimoto's daughter and her husband frequently attended the English-speaking church and were often guests in the Myers' home.

Their cook who lived with the Myers for thirty-five years and his wife were treated as members of the family and constantly revealed their gratitude and love to them.

### **Toyohiko Kagawa**

Toyohiko Kagawa was clearly guided by God to this devoted family. He was born in Kobe on July 10, 1888. Of him Dr. Myers wrote: "His father's legal wife was childless, so from early childhood he learned to know the dark side of life in an upper-class non-Christian home. His father's fortune, coming to his older brother, was lost in speculation and fast living, so at his death Toyohiko went to live with a wealthy uncle in Tokushima, in the island of Shikoku." When he decided to become a minister his uncle disowned him.

"I first knew him," wrote Dr. Myers, "as a slender, precocious boy of fourteen, who had entered high school a year younger than the legal limit. He was keen in his pursuit of English, and it was through an English Bible class that he was brought to Christ. His Christian life began with a vision of the Cross of Christ, and this has ever since been the motive power of his life. He at once threw him-

self with energy into the work of church and Sunday school, with a self-confidence that was almost embarrassing. He was a voracious reader, remembering everything that he read, and at times he would trip up his teachers in a way that made him unpopular with some of them."

The Myers took Kagawa into their home and never lost patience with him. Others despaired —they felt sure he would amount to something. They answered his questions, overlooked his idiosyncrasies, let him study anything he wished, and kept his confidence and love.

See what God has wrought. Dr. Rufus M. Jones said: "Kagawa is one of the phenomena of the Christian world today. He is not a man behind a pulpit; he is a demonstrator in a laboratory. He is showing, once more, that Christianity is not talk, it is action; it is not words, it is power. He exhibits it as soul-force, creative energy, redemptive might." His influence today is felt in a marvelous way in the entire Japanese empire and throughout the world. He is one of the world's outstanding personalities in religious, economic, social and educational fields.

## *Menacing Attitudes*

Harry's great love for the people of Japan led him into a serious error. He constantly said: "The Japanese will not go to war with America. All this talk is from the warlords and jingo

politicians." He was deeply impressed by the response to an unusually bold address by U. S. Ambassador Joseph C. Grew to the Japan-American Society in Tokyo. Mr. Grew told of the insults and assaults on Americans in China and Korea, of the sinking of the Panay and other indignities, and declared that America had taken all they were going to take and that these things would have to stop or they would have to take the consequences. After the meeting many of the prominent Japanese said to Dr. Myers: "That is just what we need. These jingo politicians and militarists are going to bring disaster to the world." He declared after Pearl Harbor that he had not understood the power of propaganda to convince the people that the emperor is divine; that they are a superior people; that they cannot be defeated; that they are destined to rule the world; nor did he rightly estimate the subtle power of the Black Dragon Society. He further expressed the conviction that "nothing short of military and naval and aerial defeat will clip the wings of the Japanese military leaders." He also expressed the conviction: "There are saints among the Japanese who would rank with the greatest of any land in holiness of life and in active service to God and humanity."

### **A Prisoner of War**

Of the days of his life, a hundred and eighty were spent in solitary confinement. On Decem-

ber 8, 1941, the day that Japan declared war on the United States, the police came to the Myers' apartment in Kobe, arrested Dr. Myers, searched everything and everywhere for evidence to support the charge they had already drawn against him, led him off to the loneliness of a solitary cell in the penitentiary. The prison cell was about five feet wide and eight feet long —the tiny light bulb was big enough to make the darkness visible, the only window was a small snoop-hole, too high to afford an outside view except as he stood on tiptoes—this was covered with a black cloth which was pushed aside for the guard's frequent inspection. The weather was cold, there was no fire in the cell, which was infested with vermin, and the prison kimono, the only clothing provided, was not enough to keep one warm. He was forced to sit on his feet for such a time that it was thought they might have to be amputated.

Eight times he was slapped by two detectives, one striking one cheek and one the other at the same time, and he said that he counted twenty-two slaps at each beating. When he refused to acknowledge that he was a spy, they told him they were going to shoot him anyway as a spy. Dr. Myers replied, "Shoot, I am ready."

When he returned to his native land Dr. Myers was called on for many addresses, and gave many interviews.

In a calm, dispassionate article,

## *“The Window in My Prison Cell”*

Dr. Myers tells of the privation, loneliness, hunger, filth, abuse, pain and apparent hopelessness of his condition during those six months.

“During the first days and weeks of my incarceration,” he wrote, “I had a feeling of utter bewilderment. Why had I been arrested? I was far beyond military age, and I had scrupulously avoided entanglement with military affairs. How long was I to be left in prison? What had the authorities done with my wife whom I had left sick in bed? What were they planning to do with me? Why did they not allow me to write to my wife and to get food and clothing from outside? It was all a mystery.”

After his glasses and all books were taken away, the loneliness, the cold, the physical discomfort, and the wretched food became almost intolerable. “One felt starved for human sympathy and friendship. It is little wonder that so many prisoners have lost their minds and have died as raving maniacs.” Our Master said: “I was in prison and ye visited Me.”

But Harry Myers was safe! While the hands of faithful parents were shaping the circumstances which were to play so powerfully on the life of their boy, they committed his life

to the hand of their loving Heavenly Father, and by their child-like faith and their daily walk and conversation, led Harry to an unconquerable faith in Him. This attitude and spirit never left him. It was the secret of his life, the motive and dynamic of his work, the joy and crown of his attractive personality.

Being a preacher and accustomed all his life to going to church on Sunday, Dr. Myers decided to hold a service of his own in the prison cell. So at eleven o'clock on each Sunday morning: "I started out with the Invocation, Call to Worship, Doxology, Responsive Reading, Offering, Prayers, Hymns, Scripture Reading, Sermon, Benediction and all the rest—all done silently, inside my own head. In the responsive reading I was first preacher and then congregation. I had no offering to make but myself. Every Sunday I chose a text and then preached a sermon to myself." With his keen sense of humor he added: "I think some of these sermons must have been rather powerful discourses, judging by the way the entire audience was moved!"

### ***The Prisoners Heard***

Christmas had always meant much to Harry. He often repeated each word of "The Night Before Christmas," and his conversation and sermons were filled with references to the Babe of Bethlehem, the Boy of Nazareth, the Man of

Galilee, the Saviour of the World. On December 24, 1941, in that lonely cell he began to think of Christmas. When all was quiet in the corridor and all the guards had disappeared for a while, the spirit of Christmas awoke in his heart and he began to whistle all the carols he knew—"Holy Night," "O Come, All Ye Faithful," "Little Town of Bethlehem," "We Three Kings of Orient Are," "As With Gladness Men of Old," "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," and many others. He said: "Presently my official pesterer came along and threw open the door of my cell in a perfect rage. Such a torrent of vituperative eloquence I had never before heard in all my life. I stood meekly, with my head down and my hands at my side, and took it all in. I thought he was going to slap me or knock me down, but he didn't. At last the flood of eloquence began to abate. Perhaps he ran out of words, or his throat may have gotten sore, but he stopped and left me. There were some twenty or thirty other foreigners in the dark cells, facing that corridor; and later during the ten-minute period of daily exercise, when I passed one or another of the prisoners on the stairs or in the corridor, they would whisper, 'Thank you for Christmas.' " Our thoughts go back to another jail where "at midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises unto God; and the prisoners heard them."

## Help from God

Dr. Myers spoke often of the 103rd Psalm: "It was this Psalm that turned my prison experiences into a blessed memory. During my one hundred and eighty days of solitary confinement I recited this Psalm at least five hundred times, and each recitation brought me a new understanding of its beauty." He especially dwelt on the quieting, comforting and assuring effects as he paused to drink in the full meaning of the three verses in the middle of this majestic and beautiful and towering Psalm:

"For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him.

"As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us.

"Like as a father pitith his children, so the Lord pitith them that fear Him."

On Sunday morning, June 6, 1942, Dr. Myers' cell door was opened and he was led to the governor of the prison. Here he was handed the order for his release. His amazement was great. "I felt like one of the old Hebrew captives returning from Babylon to Jerusalem: 'When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream.'"

Prayer to God for him had been made ceaselessly by his wife, his children, his loved ones in

America, and by hundreds of Japanese who knew and loved him. A Christian Japanese lawyer and a prominent Christian business man had made special trips to Tokyo to intercede with the Minister of Justice for his release.

He was allowed to go to a little hotel in Kobe. Mrs. Myers was allowed to see him for half an hour each day. Dr. Kagawa and other friends, who could not reach him before, sent him boxes of eggs and other nourishing food. On June 16, he and his wife with three hundred evacuees from Central Japan, Korea and Guam were herded on a train for Yokohama and the next day were put aboard the Asama Maru. After many delays, they reached Lourence Marques, on the Coast of East Africa. Here with hundreds of others they were packed in the Gripsholm, which had brought Japanese evacuees that far on their return to Japan. They landed in New York on August 25, 1942.

He received a cordial welcome, was heard with joy by large audiences all over the country and developed a spirit of faith and love and hope in the hearts of those who heard his messages. Although he had been shamefully treated in so many ways he never revealed in any of his letters or addresses any hatred of his persecutors. He never uttered one word of complaint.

On August 10, 1945, Harry's tired body was laid away in the beautiful Lexington, Virginia,

cemetery after his radiant spirit had returned unto God who gave it. At the grave Rev. J. J. Murray, the present pastor of the church of his parents and of his boyhood days, made

### **A Heartfelt Prayer**

“Our Father, from Whom we have come in the beginning and to Whom we return at the end of our short earthly lives, we are grateful for Thy presence among us. We thank Thee that at the time when no human word can comfort and no human heart bring us the help that we need we have the exceeding great and precious promises of Thy Holy Word and the assurance of the power of Jesus Christ.

“We thank Thee for our friend, for his fine spirit and his good life of service. We know that we can trust him now to Thee without a fear, sure that he has entered into the light of Thy presence and into the fullness of the fellowship of his Lord. We are grateful for the news that comes this day of peace with the people whom he loved and whom he served through good and ill; and we pray for them that being freed from an evil leadership they may find a chance for better life.

“Be close, we pray, to his loved ones this day. Comfort and strengthen them; and put into their hearts for their loved one and for themselves the eternal hope. This we pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who loved us

and gave Himself for us; who died for us and rose again; and who lives today as our Saviour and Friend. Amen."

## *A Clear Call*

"During those six months of solitary confinement in the prisons of Japan," declared Dr. Myers, "God spoke to me again and again in a clear unmistakable manner. God taught me many lessons that I could never have learned in any other way. My life will always be richer because of the lessons He taught me in those prison days and nights. God is not a mere vague influence or an impersonal power. He is a living Personality. He lives, He loves, He speaks, and He brings strength and comfort and blessing to all who will listen to Him."

We can say of Harry W. Myers what was said of Moses, "As one who saw the King Invisible, he never flinched."

From Myers' life, in unison with Rev. John S. B. Monsell, comes the call to you and to me.

"Fight the good fight with all thy might;  
Christ is thy strength and Christ the right;  
Lay hold on life, and it shall be  
Thy joy and crown eternally.

"Faint not nor fear, His arms are near;  
He changeth not, and thou art dear;  
Only believe, and thou shall see  
That Christ is all in all to thee."

Louisville, Ky.



Other literature that may guide you in discovering the will of God and help you to lay hold on life may be secured from The Executive Committee of Christian Education, Presbyterian Church in the United States, Rev. Wade H. Boggs, Executive Secretary, 410 Urban Building, Louisville 2, Ky.



